DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 360 824 FL 021 364

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TITLE The International English Language Testing System (IELTS): The Speaking Test.
PUB DATE 91
NOTE 15p.; Presented to the 1990 RELC Regional Seminar (Singapore, April 9-12, 1990). Adapted from a paper by D. E. Ingram and Elaine Wylie presented at the Language Testing Research Colloquium (San Francisco, March 2-5, 1990). For serial publication in which this article appears, see FL 021 359. For a related paper, see ED 342 211.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT Language and Language Education; Working Papers of the National Languages Institute of Australia; v1 n1 p101-114 1991

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *English (Second Language); English for Academic Purposes; Foreign Countries; Foreign Students; *Language Proficiency; *Language Tests; *Screening Tests; *Student Placement; Test Construction; *Testing
IDENTIFIERS Australia (Queensland)

ABSTRACT

The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) assesses proficiency in English both generally and for special purposes of non-native English speakers studying, training, or learning English in English-speaking countries. The Speaking subtest of the IELTS measures a candidate's general proficiency in speaking in everyday situations via a structured, five-phase oral interview. During the interview, the interviewer and candidate exchange introductions, the candidate speaks at length about a familiar topic, queries the interviewer, expresses ideas and attitudes, and the interviewer concludes the session. Maximum speaking proficiency is then rated against the Band Scale. Documentation for the speaking test includes training and administration manuals for interviewers, a sample test, and the Speaking Band Scale. Issues to be addressed in future research on the IELTS Speaking subtest include validity and reliability of the Speaking test, its relationship with other subtests of the IELTS and with other tests, rater consistency, the use of lay persons as interviewers, and effect of the interview situation. (JP)

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THE INTERNATIONAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE TESTING SYSTEM (IELTS): THE SPEAKING TEST[1]

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ABSTRACT

One of the more innovative aspects of the recently released IELTS test is the Speaking sub-test. This paper deals with the nature of the IELTS Speaking test, outlines the form it takes, discusses the more innovative aspects of it (especially the attempt made to transfer initiative from the interviewer to the candidate), considers the way in which the interview is to be conducted and how reliability is to be achieved.

INTRODUCTION

The International English Language Testing System is an international test designed to assess the general English proficiency and the proficiency in English for special (in particular, academic) purposes of non-native English speakers wishing to undertake an academic study programme, train, or learn English in English-speaking countries. The test is the result of a joint project of Britain and Australia together with some formal participation from Canada and assistance in certain areas from testers elsewhere. The test is intended to be administered on a mass scale, virtually on demand anywhere in the world, and by persons who, for practical including financial reasons, may have received only a minimum of training in the administration of the test. These factors (the international nature of the test, its aim to measure both general proficiency and ESP/EAP, its large-scale use, and the use of relatively untrained administrators) have had a profound influence on all aspects of the test but, in particular, on the test of Speaking

LLE (1991) 1,1:101-114

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proficiency.

It is necessary to observe at the outset of this paper that the IELTS is a secure test and the training materials are also regarded as secure. Hence, for the most part, the items given as examples do not occur in any live version of the test. Some of the examples used are taken from the specimen or exemplar test, which is publicly available and is used to inform candidates about what to expect in the test.

NATURE OF THE SPEAKING TEST

The IELTS has two components, a General component aimed at measuring the candidate's general proficiency, and a so-called Modular component, which assesses the candidate's proficiency in reading and writing in a broad disciplinary area relevant to those reading and writing skills needed for academic study or training. In order to cater for candidates of a wide range of proficiency, the General component is focused around Band 4, and the Modular EAP/ESP component is focused around Band 6 on the 9-band IELTS scales, without the possibility of assessing above and below these levels being excluded. The Speaking test is in the General component, though, by its nature, it is able to assess candidates throughout the proficiency range (or at least from Band 3 to Band 9), and the phases of the test are graduated in order to facilitate coverage of this broad proficiency range.

The principal constraining factors on the design of the Speaking test include the following:

1. In order to constrain administrative costs, the overall administration time for the whole of the IELTS was not to exceed 150 minutes and the Speaking test was set for a range between 11 and 15 minutes.
2. It was believed that an oral interview was the best means by which to assess candidates' practical speaking skills and so the IELTS Speaking test is a 'direct' test in which the candidates are encouraged to speak while their language is observed by the

interviewer and matched against a proficiency scale or nine-point 'Band Scale'.

3. Because the test is to be administered anywhere in the world, often in circumstances in which relatively little control can be exercised over the selection and skills of interviewers, and because concern had been expressed at the apparent unreliability of the Speaking component of the British Council's former ELTS test, the IELTS Speaking test was designed to exercise more constraint over what the interviewers could do in the interview, i.e., it is a closely structured rather than a free interview, and mechanisms have been set up by which to monitor both the quality of the interview and the assessments assigned.

4. Because, in an English-speaking academic or training environment, students or trainees are expected to ask questions, seek information, and seek assistance when it is needed, it was considered essential that the Speaking test provide the opportunity for candidates to take the initiative rather than just respond to questions and other direction-giving utterances from the interviewer. Consequently, two of the five phases of the interview deliberately give the candidate the opportunity to take the initiative, to speak at length on some topic of interest to him or herself (Phase 2), and, especially, to ask questions with minimal guidance (Phase 3).

PURPOSE

The purpose of the Speaking test is to assess the candidate's general proficiency in speaking in everyday situations. The test is designed to elicit the candidate's maximum speaking proficiency, which is then rated against the Band Scale. The emphasis of the test is on measuring candidates' practical skills in everyday situations relevant to the candidates (i.e., that they could conceivably

be in) rather than their formal knowledge of grammar, vocabulary or other elements of the language. Item writers are instructed to develop activities that focus on specified purposes, tasks, skills and functions and that allow candidates to demonstrate their level of proficiency in general rather than academic contexts.

STRUCTURE OF THE INTERVIEW

The Speaking test is a structured oral interview that leads candidates through activities requiring progressively higher proficiency levels. Though a choice of activities is provided for each phase of the test and the interviewer is required to select from these, it is stressed also that the interview must be conducted flexibly so that the interviewer can choose an alternative activity if one does not work or seems to have provoked a rote-memorised utterance, so that a wide proficiency range can be catered for in any activity, and so that test security is not too readily breached. Interviewers are required to proceed through all the phases, except with very low level candidates who are manifestly unable to proceed, though the recommended times for each phase may differ slightly, e.g., higher level candidates may proceed more rapidly through the earlier phases and spend a little longer on later phases where their higher proficiency levels are more readily demonstrated and, with lower level candidates, more time may be spent on earlier phases. The interview is intended to flow as far as possible like a normal conversation, albeit a guided and structured conversation, and hence interviewers are required to ensure that smooth bridges are provided, as far as possible, from one phase to the next.

The interview is in five phases:

Phase 1 is the Introduction. Its focus is at Band 3 level though more proficient candidates may well perform at higher levels. It is intended to last from 1 to 2 minutes. Its purpose is to allow interviewers to introduce themselves, to exchange greetings, to check the candidate's identity, and to settle the candidate down ready for the main part of the interview. The main skills and functions elicited in this phase are listed in the specifications as:

using social formulae, providing personal information, and providing general factual information.

Phase 2 is Extended Discourse and is designed to give the candidate an opportunity to take the initiative and to speak at length on some topic well known to the candidate such as some aspect of his or her own culture, place of living or country of origin. It focuses around Bands 3 to 4 and should last 3 to 4 minutes, with the candidate doing most of the talking and the interviewer mainly using stimulus questions or comments to prompt the candidate should he or she 'dry up'. The main skills and functions elicited include providing general factual information, expressing likes and dislikes, giving directions and instructions, describing and comparing, narrating events and sequences of events, and explaining how something works.

Phase 3 is the Elicitation phase and is of particular importance since, because students in English-speaking academic programmes are expected to ask questions and take initiative in communication situations, this phase reverses the usual interviewer-dominated situation, gives the initiative to the candidate, and requires the candidate to ask questions of the interviewer. For this reason, the bridge into Phase 3 from Phase 2 is recommended to be more overt than between other phases and the interviewer is required to state categorically to the candidate that, in this phase, he or she is to ask questions. The phase lasts 3 to 5 minutes and uses activities accessible in the Band 3 to 6 range based on information-gap activities. The main skills and functions focused on are: eliciting general factual information; eliciting information about objects, events and sequences of events; eliciting opinions, attitudes and values; and eliciting explanations of how something works or why something is the case.

Phase 4 is Speculation and Attitudes. It lasts 3 to 4 minutes, is especially designed to allow candidates in the Band 5 to 6 range or higher to demonstrate their proficiency, and involves activities which require the candidate to speculate, express ideas, attitudes and plans with some precision, to demonstrate the ability to switch register, and, in particular, to use language relevant to their

particular academic, vocational or other interests. The main skills and functions focused on in this phase include providing general, personal and factual information; expressing opinions, intentions, attitudes and emotions; describing and comparing objects, events and sequences of events; and speculating on future events and their consequences.

Phase 5 is the Conclusion. The interviewer rounds off the interview, and drops the activities back to the level of the candidate so that the interview ends with the candidate performing at his or her own level. This phase lasts about one minute and entails, as the main skills and functions, using social formulae, saying farewell, and thanking.

ACTIVITIES

Since, as noted earlier, the IELTS is a secure test, it is not possible to give actual samples of the activities that comprise the Speaking test but an indication can be given of the sorts of activities that occur. Where examples are quoted below, they have been taken from the publicly available exemplar or specimen test. A considerable number of actual activities are proposed for each phase in each version of the test and interviewers are required to select from those specified. The emphasis in the activities is on realistic activities that candidates could conceivably be involved in, especially on arrival in the country to which they are going. Role play by the candidate is specifically ruled out because it entails things other than language proficiency (e.g., dramatic ability, imagination, and the ability of the interviewer to create a situation) and the candidate is always required to be him or herself.

In *Phase 1*, candidates are required to answer simple questions about their name, their family, their home locality, and their interests. In *Phase 2*, candidates are given the opportunity to speak at length on some topic well-known to them. Thus, for example, they could be asked to talk about the local food, how it is prepared and how it is eaten, or they might be asked to discuss such things as theatre, festivals, dancing, games or sports in their

own country. The interviewer is advised to give the candidate the chance to talk about more than one topic if that is necessary in order to elicit extended speech. *Phase 3* activities give the initiative to the candidates and require them to ask questions in information-gap tasks with particular emphasis on tasks that students studying or training overseas are commonly involved in. For example, the candidate could be given a sketch map of an area with instructions to ask questions of the interviewer (who has a detailed map) to find their way to a certain building; or the candidate might be given a timetable showing lectures and other study activities and be told to ask the interviewer (who has a complete language laboratory schedule), questions, so as to write into the timetable some private language laboratory practice sessions. In this phase, simple artefacts containing minimal language may be used (e.g., a map, a photograph, a diagram) and the candidate is given a cue card with a very short, simply worded instruction and three or four one or two-word suggestions as to things to ask about. At present, the specifications require that all candidates be given the cue card, though some of those who have worked on the development of the test believe that the cue card should be used only if the candidate 'dries up' and needs suggestions as to what to talk about. There is a need for research as to whether the cue card should be used only if needed, and whether the optional use of the cue card makes the test more or less valid and reliable. *Phase 4* requires candidates to speculate and so the interviewer leads them to talk about their future plans, their hopes and ambitions, the relevance to their country of what they are planning to do, and so on. To assist the interviewer with this phase, all candidates are asked, prior to the interview, to fill out a brief curriculum vitae. *Phase 5* involves a brief reference to something that might already have been discussed, it usually grows straight out of that, had been discussed in Phase 4, and it leads to expressions of farewell and good wishes.

Whereas other pencil and paper test types depend largely on statistical validation procedures for their validity and reliability, interview-based tests depend heavily on the quality of training of

the interviewers and raters. For this reason, the Speaking test will be administered only by trained ESL teachers who have undergone a short training programme in interviewing for the IELTS. This training programme includes discussion of the principles of 'direct' proficiency assessment, an introduction to the documentation of the test (see below), discussion of the principles of interviewing and rating, viewing, discussing and rating videotaped interviews, and conducting live interviews. Subsequently, interviewers undergoing training are required to conduct interviews onto tape and rate them successfully before they will be certificated to conduct interviews. In addition, the training package contains documentation explaining the Speaking test and its conduct, an administration manual, and videotaped material - comprising a 30-minute introduction to the Speaking test and twenty-two 11- to 15-minute interviews with commentaries - that can be used as a basis for discussing interviewing and for practising rating. All interviewers will be required to work through the training package at regular intervals if their certification is to remain valid.

In addition to the training given to interviewers, it is proposed that a cross-section of the interviews they conduct will be monitored. For this purpose, all interviews will be taped and one in ten of the interviews of each interviewer will be chosen at random for return to Britain or Australia for moderation to ensure that the quality of their interviewing is not declining and that their ratings remain valid and reliable.

TEST DOCUMENTATION

The Speaking test is accompanied by the following documentation:

1. The specifications provide explicit guidance to item-writers on the preparation of future parallel forms of the test. The specifications include statements on the general purpose of the IELTS and the Speaking test in particular, the test focus, cultural appropriateness (a complex issue in an international test developed by two

culturally distinct countries), the structure of the test, scoring and interpretation, and administration of the test. Probably the most important of these sections is that on the structure of the test; this outlines the phases of the test and specifies the content of each in terms of its purpose, band focus, tasks and stimuli, and skills and functions.

2. An Assessment Guide or training manual has been prepared to give potential interviewers training in how to conduct the Speaking test. It is accompanied by videotaped excerpts from interviews and some complete interviews which illustrate points raised in the manual. A more formal training manual has also been written and is intended as notes that can be used in conducting training sessions for interviewers. The introductory video and set of twenty-two videotaped interviews for training purposes referred to earlier are also available.
3. The Administration Manual gives procedural guidance to interviewers and administrators.
4. There is an exemplar or specimen test which is available to candidates and provides a brief example of the sorts of things candidates can expect in each phase of the Speaking test.
5. The Speaking Band Scale is the rating scale against which candidates' speaking proficiency is rated. It consists of nine band levels from zero to native-like, each of which is a short behavioural description of the Speaking ability to be observed at that level. A copy of the present form of the Speaking Band Scale is in the appendix to this paper.

FUTURE RESEARCH

To date, the Speaking test has been completed in its initial form, a specimen test has been written, the other documentation referred

to above has been prepared, the videotaped training material has been completed, and the last tapes are about to be released. The formal trials of the IELTS have included some attention to the Speaking test though much more research into aspects of the test is expected in future. A few from amongst the many issues that should be considered include:

1. The validity and reliability of the test, its relationship with the other sub-tests of IELTS, and its relationship with other tests such as TOEFL and ASLPR; though the trials to date have done some of this with satisfactory results, earlier drafts of the IELTS were used and interviewer training programmes were not entirely satisfactory.
2. The validity and reliability of the scale, in particular the extent to which different raters, in different countries, assessing candidates speaking different target varieties of English, provide the same ratings.
3. The effect of different strategies within the test, e.g., giving the cue card at the start of Phase 3 or withholding it until (and if) it becomes necessary.
4. The effect of using lay persons (as opposed to trained ESL teachers) as interviewers and the effect of specific training on interviewing and rating on the validity and reliability of the test.
5. The validity and reliability of the IELTS structured interview in comparison with the freer interview used with scales such as the ASLPR or FSI.
6. The predictive validity of the test for candidates entering academic or other training programmes.
7. The effect of the interview situation, e.g., a formal across-the-table interview as against a more relaxed situation.
8. Comparison between a global rating scale such as the present band scale with more analytic scales such as are proposed for assessing the IELTS writing scripts.
9. Comparison between ratings assigned by the

interviewer and those assigned by a separate rater and between live ratings and ratings of audio- or video-recorded interviews.

10. The monitoring and moderation process, how to manage it, and its effects on the validity and reliability of the test.

11. The effect of interviewer fatigue on the candidate's demonstrated level of proficiency and how to counter such interference.

NOTES

1. Presented to the 1990 RELC Regional Seminar "Language Testing and Language Programme Evaluation", RELC, Singapore, 9-12 April, 1990. Adapted from a paper by D. E. Ingram and Elaine Wylie presented at the Language Testing Research Colloquium, San Francisco, 2-5 March, 1990.

APPENDIX I: DRAFT BAND SCALE FOR SPEAKING

(Version drafted 19-7-89 by Greg Deakin, Elaine Wylie and David Ingram and revised 16-8-89)

9. Speech is fluent, situationally appropriate and fully acceptable in all features though a slight non-intrusive accent may be observed.
8. Communicates effectively on all general, academic, vocational or leisure topics relevant to own interests and experiences. Speech is fluent and readily comprehensible though occasional non-systematic errors in grammar, vocabulary and sometimes a strong accent may occur without impeding communication. Can use speculative, argumentative, descriptive, and narrative language flexibly to convey precise meanings. Extended structuring including cohesive features is accurate and appropriate. Can vary the language to suit situational (i.e., register) requirements with only occasional inappropriacies.
7. Communicates effectively on a wide range of general, academic, vocational or leisure topics. Occasional errors in vocabulary, and structure may occur without inhibiting communication. Communicates readily and fairly precisely using complex sentence forms and a wide range of modifiers, connectives and cohesive features. Displays some flexibility in the use of speculative, argumentative, descriptive and narrative language. Can generally vary the language to suit situational (i.e., register) requirements) and can talk on own subject area with ease and fluency.
6. Generally communicates effectively on general topics and on other matters relevant to own immediate academic, vocational or leisure interests. Can use complex sentence forms and a wide range of modifiers, connectives, and cohesive features to convey most meanings fairly precisely though errors in grammar and vocabulary may occur and occasionally interfere with communication. Is generally able to use circumlocution

to cover gaps in vocabulary and structure. Can present speculation, extended argument, and long or complex description or narration though errors in structure or coherence may sometimes occur. Shows some skill in varying language to suit situational (i.e., register) requirements.

5. Is broadly able to convey meaning on most general topics though errors in structure and vocabulary may interfere with communication. Can engage in extended conversation on most general topics, generally making use of relevant connectives and other cohesive features. Has some ability to use complex sentence forms and modifiers. However, has difficulty in presenting speculation and extended argument, while long or complex description or narration may lose coherence. Lacks flexibility and is unable to vary language significantly to suit situational (i.e., register) requirements.
4. Can convey basic meaning on familiar topics. Can give uncomplicated directions and use common question forms to elicit information (though not necessarily with correct word order). Has control of basic sentence forms but longer utterances tend to break down. Can link simple sentences using the most frequently occurring connectives. Errors in grammar and vocabulary are frequent and may interfere with communication. Tentative use of modifiers limits ability to describe, give precise information or express attitudes. Pronunciation may often be faulty and impede communication.
3. Can convey only simple meaning on very familiar topics. Can answer simple questions and respond to simple statements. Has only limited ability to take the initiative with original statements and questions. Basic sentence forms appear to be used though grammatical errors are numerous except in memorised utterances. Essentially no ability to link sentences or use modifiers. Pronunciation is likely to be strongly influenced by the first language and to significantly impede communication.
2. Little communication is possible except for the most rudimentary information using very limited vocabulary. Utterances consist of isolated words or short memorised

phrases. Frequent pauses may occur as the candidate searches for words. Pronunciation is strongly influenced by the first language and is often unintelligible.

1. Essentially unable to speak English. Limited to at most a very few isolated words, memorised utterances or fragments of virtually no communicative significance.
0. Candidate did not attempt interview. No assessable information provided.

APPENDIX 2:GLOSSARY OF TERMS USED IN BAND SCALE

accent: refers to all phonological features including pronunciation and suprasegmental features (e.g., stress, rhythm and intonation).

cohesive features: those words and morphemes that serve to link parts of sentences and texts to each other and to the context. They include such things as morphological features, pronouns, demonstratives and connectives.

connectives: linking devices such as conjunctions, relative pronouns, sentence adverbials (e.g., *however, nevertheless).*

modifiers: words, phrases and clauses such as adjectives, adverbs, adjectival and adverbial phrases and clauses and other qualifying forms that serve to modify or elaborate meaning, to refine it, or to make it more precise or imprecise.

registers: the different forms that a language takes as a result of variations that occur in response to changes in the situation (q.v.).

situations: the total setting within which the language occurs, including the physical location, time, the persons involved and their moods, relationships, and personal characteristics, the purpose of the language act, the subject matter being discussed, the mode in which the language occurs (e.g., oral or written), and so on.